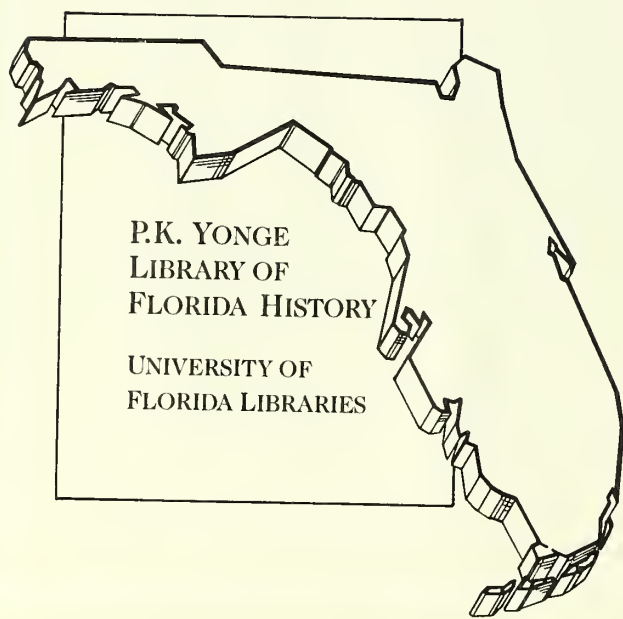


A NATURALISTS' EXCURSION IN
FLORIDA

WRITERS PROGRAM

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Florida - Bulowville -
"A Naturalist's Excursion in Florida." *Bulowville Fla.*
1831
London

This letter is from Mr. Audubon to the Editor of the American
Monthly Journal of Geology, etc., published at Philadelphia.

Bulowville, Florida,

Dec., 31st, 1831.

My Dear F:-

I have just returned from an expedition down the Halifax River,
about forty miles from this place, and eighty miles South of St.
Augustine. I feel confident that an account of it will be inter-
esting to you and I therefore set to:-

Mr. J. J. Bulow, a rich planter, at whose house myself and party
have been a whole week under the most hospitable and welcome treatment
that could possibly be expected, proposed three days since, that we
should proceed down the river in search of new or valuable birds, and
accordingly the boats, six hands and three white men with some pro-
visions put off with fair wind and pure sky. I say pure sky because
not a cloud interrupted the rich blue of the heavens in this gener-
ally favored latitude. We meandered down a creek about eleven miles,
the water nearly torpid, but clear, the shore lined with thousand of
acres, covered by fall grapes, marshes and high palm-trees, render-
ing the shore quite novel to my anxious eye. Some bird were shot and

brought back in order to undergo the skinning operation. Before long we entered the Halifax River, an inland arm of the sea measuring in breadth from a quarter to nearly a mile. The breeze was keen from the Northeast, and our light bark leaped over the waves gaily onward toward the spot to which we all anxiously anticipated to reach ere night came on. We did so, passing several plantations on the western bank, and at last reaching a schooner from New York, anchored at what is here called a live oak landing. Kindly received by the master and his men we spent the night very agreeably and as comfortably as circumstances would permit. At sunrise the next morning I and four negro servants proceeded in search of birds and adventure. The fact is I was anxious to kill some twenty-five brown pelicans to enable me to make a new drawing of an adult male bird, and to preserve the dresses of the others. I proceeded along a narrow shallow bay where the fish were truly abundant. Would you believe it if I was to say that the fish nearly obstructed our headway. Believe it, or believe it or not, so it was, the water was filled with them large and small. I shot some rare birds and putting along the shore, when lo, I came in sight of several pelicans perched on the branches of the mangrove trees seated in comfortable harmony, as near each other as the strength of the branches would allow. I ordered to back water gently, the hands backed water, I waded to the shore under the cover of the rushes on it, saw the pelicans fast asleep, examined their countenances and departed leisurely, and after all levelled and fired my piece and dropped two of the finest

specimens I ever saw. I really believe I would have shot one hundred of these reverend sirs had not a mistake taken place in the reloading of my gun. A mistake did, however, take place and to my utmost disappointment I saw each pelican, young and old, leave his perch and take to wing, soaring off well pleased, I dare say, at making an escape from so dangerous a foe. The birds were all gone and soaring high in the pure atmosphere, but the fish were as abundant as ever, I ordered the net to be thrown overboard, and in a few minutes we caught as many as we wanted, fine fish too, bass and roe mullett. The porpoise were as busy as ourselves and devoured them at great rate.

The tide now began to leave us and you must know that in this part of the country the tide goes down not a pace but in a hurry, so much so indeed that notwithstanding our rowing before it, we were on several occasions obliged to leap into the briny stream and push the boat over oyster banks sharp as razors. After shooting some more birds and pulling our boat through many a difficult channel, we reached the schooner again, and as the birds generally speaking, appeared wild and few, (you must be aware that I call birds few when I shoot less than a hundred per day). My generous host proposed to turn toward home again. Preparations were accordingly made, and we left the schooner again with tide and wind in our teeth, and with prospects of a severe cold night. Our hands pulled well and our bark was as light as our hearts. All went on merrily until dark night came on. The wind freshening, the cold augmenting, the provisions diminishing, the water lowering, all depreciating except our enterprising dispositions. We

found ourselves fast in the mud about three hundred yards from a marshy shore, without the least hope of being able to raise a fire, for no trees except palm trees were near, and the gran'diable himself could not burn one of them. Our minds were soon made up to do what? Why, to roll ourselves in our cloaks and to lay down the best we could at the bottom of our light and beautiful bark. What a night, to sleep was impossible, the cold increased with the breeze and every moment seemed an hour from the time we stretched ourselves down until the light of the morn, but the morn came clear as ever morn was, and the Northeaster cold as any wind that blows in this latitude. All hands half dead and the master nearly as exhausted as the hands, stiffended with cold, light clothed and with but little hope of our nearing any shore, our only resort was to leap into the mire waist deep and to push the bark to a point some five or six hundred yards where a few scrubby trees seemed to have grown to save our lives on this occasion. Push, boys, push push for your lives cried the generous Bulow and the poor Audubon, "All hands push" Aye, and well might we push, the mire was up to our breasts, our limbs becoming stiffened and almost useless at every step we took. Our progress was as slowly performed as if we had been clogged with heavy chains. It took us two and one half hours to reach the point where the few trees of which I have spoken were, but we did get there.

We landed and well it was that we did, for on reaching the margin of the marsh two of the negroes fell down in the mud as senseless as torpidity ever rendered an alligator or snake, and had we, the

white men, not been there they certainly would have died. We had them carried into the little grove to which I believe all of us owe our lives. I struck a fire and in a few minutes I saw with indescribable pleasure the bright warming blaze of a log pile in the center of our shivering party. We wrapped the negroes in their blankets, boiled some water, and soon had some tea, made them swallow it and with care revived them into animation. May God preserve you from ever being in the condition of our party at this juncture, scarcely a man able to stand, and the cold wind blowing as keenly as ever. Our men, however, gradually revived, the trees one after another fell under the hatchet and increased our fire, and in two hours I had the pleasure of seeing cheerful faces again. We all got warm and tolerably gay, altho' the prospect was far from being pleasant, no road to go home or to any habitation, confined to the large salt marsh with rushes head high and miry, no provisions left and fifteen miles from the home of our host.

Not a moment to be lost, for I foresaw that the next night would be much colder still. The boat was manned once more and off through the mud we moved, to double the point and enter the creek of which I have already spoken, with a hope that in it we should find water enough to float her. It did happen so and as we once more saw our bark afloat our spirits rose and rose to such a pitch that we set fire to the whole marsh, crack, crack, crack went the reeds in the rapid blaze. We saw the marsh rabbits, etc. scampering from the fire by the

thousands as we pulled our oars. Our pleasure at being afloat did not last long. The northeaster had well nigh emptied the creek of all its usual quantity of water, and to wade and push our boat over many a shallow place was again our resort with intent to making a landing from whence we could gain the sea beach, we did effect a landing at last. The boat was abandoned at last, and game fastened to the backs of the negroes, the guns reloaded and on we proceeded through the marsh first, and then the tangled palmettos and scrubby live oaks until we reached the sea beach.

The sea beach of east Florida, have you ever seen it? If not, I advise you strongly never to pay a visit to it under the circumstances that brought myself and companions to it yesterday morning. We saw the ocean spread before our eyes, but it looked angry and rough strewn with high agitated waves that came in quick succession toward the desolate naked shore; not an object in view but the pure sky and the agitated water. We took up our line of march in poor plight, believe me., the poles on laying down their arms could not have felt more done up than we did at this moment, walking along the sea beach of Florida in the month of December with the winds at northeast and we going in its teeth through sand that sent our feet back six inches at every step of the two feet that we made. Well, through this sand we all waded for many a long mile, picking up here and there a shell that is nowhere else to be found, until we reached

the landing place of J. J. Bulow. Now my heart cheers up once more for the sake of my most kind host, troubled with rheumatic pains as he is, I assure you I was glad to see him nearing his own comfortable roof, and as we saw the large house opening to view across his immense plantation, I anticipated a good dinner with as much pleasure as I ever experienced.

All hands returned alive; refreshments and good care have made us all well again, unless it be the stiffness occasioned in my left leg by nearly six weeks of wading through the vilest thickets of scrubby live oaks and palmettos that appear to have been created for no purpose but to punish us for our sins. Thickets that can only be matched in the cantos of your favorite Danto.

To give you an account of the little I have seen of East Florida would fill a volume, and therefore I will not attempt it just now but I will draw a slight sketch of part of it. The land, if land it can be called, is generally so very sandy that nothing can be raised upon it. The swamps are the only spots that can afford a fair chance for cultivation; the swamps then are the only places where plantations can be found, these plantations are even few in number. Along the East Coast from St. Augustine to Cape Canaveral there are about a dozen, these with exceptions of two or three are yet young plantations. General Hernandez, J. J. Bulow and Mr. Durham's are the strongest and perhaps the best. Sugarcane will prosper and perhaps

do well, but labor necessary to produce a good crop is great, great, great. Between the swamps of which I speak and which are found along the margin lying West of the sea inlet that divides the main land from the Atlantic to the river St. John, of the interior of the peninsula, nothing exists but barren pine lands and poor timber and immense savannahs most overflowed and all unfit for cultivation. That growth, which in any other country is called underwood, scarcely exists; the land being covered with low palmettos, or very low thickly branched dwarf oaks almost impenetrable to man. The climate is of a most unsettled nature, at least at this season. The thermometer has made leaps from 30 to 89 degrees in 24 hours; cold, warm, sandy, muddy, watery, all of these varieties may be felt and seen in one days travelling.

I am extremely disappointed in this portion of Florida and would not advise anyone to visit it, because he may have read the flowery account of preceeding travelers. The climate is much more unsteady than in Louisiana, in the same latitude or anywhere along the Mexican Gulf to the Sabine River, which is our boundary line. Game and fish, it is true are abundant, but the body of the valuable tillable land is too small to enable the peninsula ever to become a rich state.

I have seen nothing deserving your attention in a geological point of view, except quarries of stone which are a concrete of shells excellent for building, and lying immediately under the surface of the

sand, which everywhere seems to predominate. This concrete is curious in itself, and my friend Bulow, who is now erecting some very extensive buildings for a sugar house, has given me specimens which I will forward to you, showing the different grades or ages of their formation. The fragments are cut out of the quarry with the common wood axe and fashioned with the same instrument for buildings. You, of course, will readily make out that the water found in the neighborhood of all concrete is hard of calcareous, being filtered through a kind of a natural shell lime.

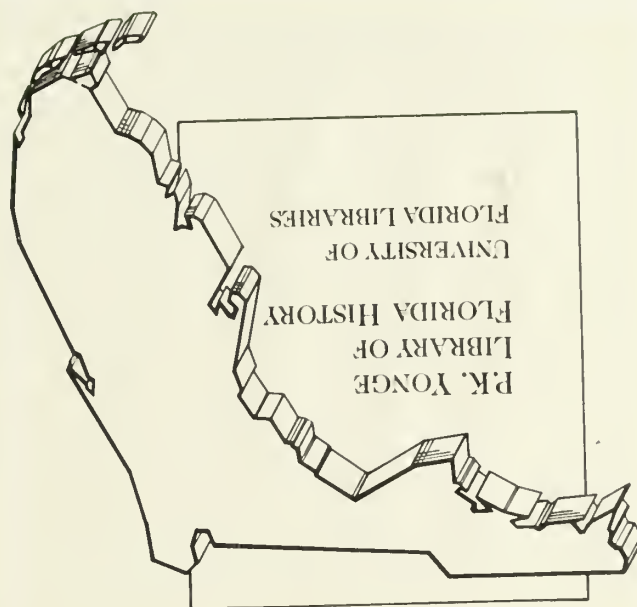
I have done but little, I am sorry to say in my line. Birds are certainly not abundant here at this season, and I can readily account for this deficiency in the land birds; it is for the most part the want of mast, mast, so abundant in almost every section of our country. But the water birds, notwithstanding all the fishes in every river, creek or even puddle that I have seen, are scarce beyond belief. It is true a man may see hundreds of pelicans and thousands of herons, but take these from the list and water birds will be found very scarce. I will see what Spring will do and then write more fully on this my devoted subject. If I did not believe the day to be gone by when it was necessary to defend my snake stories, I could send you very curious accounts of the habits of these reptiles; and I should do it if it were not that I might be thought to enjoy too much that triumph which feeble hostility of three or four selfish individuals had forced upon me. I received so many acts of

real friendship and disinterested kindness, that I thank God, there is no room left in my heart to cherish unkind feelings toward anyone. Indeed I am not so much surprised at the incredulity of persons who do leave cities, for I occasionally hear of things which even stagger me, who so often is a denizen in the woods and swamps. What do you think of rattle snakes taking to the water and swimming across inlets and rivers: I have not seen this but I believe it; since the most respected individuals assure me that they have frequently been eye witnesses of this feat. I can conceive of inducement that reptiles have for traversing sheets of water to gain distant dry lands, especially in a country much intersected by streams and subjected to inundation which compels them to be often in the water. In such countries it is not an uncommon occurrence to find snakes afloat and at a great distance from shore. This appears no doubt to those who live where there is nothing but dry land; still they ought to be good natured and believe what others have seen. It has now been made notorious that numerous respected individuals, whom duty or the love of adventure, have led into the wilds of our country, have often seen snakes and the rattle snakes too in trees; the good people therefore who pass their lives in stores and counting houses ought not to contradict this fact, because they do not meet with rattle snakes hissing and snapping at them from the paper mulberries as they go home to their dinners. They should remember that they ought to go farther than daily distance if they wish to see anything extraordinary.

And now my dear F. adieu. In my next I hope to give you some account of St. John's River and of the interior of the peninsula of East Florida, to the exploring of which I mean to devote some time.

Very faithfully yours,

John James Audubon.



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